

NIHR 133712 Global Health Research Group on Promoting Children's and Adolescents' Mental Wellbeing in Sub-Saharan Africa Project

POLICY BRIEF

The Neural Bridge: Reclaiming School Climate for Human Capital Development

The Ontological Gap: Why Structural Inputs are Insufficient

The Second National Strategy for Transformation (NST2) prioritises quality education, investments in infrastructure and school meals but it often encounters a hidden barrier: the 'Cognitive Tax' of deprivation. Children living with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) often remain in a state of neurobiological hyper-arousal, which blocks the neural pathways required for learning. This leads to poor focus, disruptive behaviour, and a high-stress school climate.

The Solution: A Joint University of Aberdeen and University of Rwanda Initiative

Our research, led by the University of Aberdeen and the University of Rwanda College of Education, demonstrates that mindfulness-based interventions (MBI) act as a Neural Bridge. Integrated into daily transitions with zero curriculum time, these exercises move pupils from a 'survival' state to a 'learning' state.

The Mechanism: The 'Two Pathways' to Classroom Emergence

The policy value of mindfulness is robust because its primary impact is emergent—the entire system benefits even when individual engagement varies:

- The Individual Spectrum: Not all children benefit directly or immediately; some may be too traumatised to engage, while others may simply comply or opt out.
- The Indirect (Emergent) Pathway: However, when the most disruptive pupils (e.g., the 6 or 7 who previously wandered or disturbed the class) gain the ability to self-regulate and stay at their desks, a positive externality occurs.
- Result: The teacher's 'stress-load' drops, instructional time increases, and a calmer, more productive climate emerges for every child in the room.

A Tool for Positive Discipline

As Rwanda has abolished corporal punishment, teachers require practical alternatives to maintain order.

- **Proof of Concept:** At our pilot school, the Headteacher reported that disciplinary referrals fell to near-zero following the intervention.
- **De-escalating the Classroom:** Mindfulness transforms the school to a site of co-regulation, removing the primary triggers for punitive measures like shouting.

Alignment with National Frameworks

This intervention is a low-cost, high-impact tool that directly supports:

- **WHO Health Promoting Schools Initiative:** Providing a concrete mental health tool for the school environment.
- **Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC):** Delivering the mandated ‘Generic Competences’ of self-regulation and interpersonal relations.
- **School Feeding Programs:** Ensuring pupils are emotionally regulated enough to benefit from nutritional inputs.
- **Health Sector Strategic Plan Five (HSSPV).**
- **Rwanda Mental Health Strategic Plan.**

Sustainability and Scalability

- **TTC Integration:** Our trained educators at the University of Rwanda College of Education and Kirambo Teacher Training College (TTC) ensure that these skills can be embedded at the foundational level of teacher education.
- **Open Access:** All training and student materials are locally adapted, translated, and available via Open Access, ensuring that upscaling is not prohibitive for the national budget.

Policy Recommendations

1. **National Curriculum:** The **Rwanda Basic Education Board (REB)** should integrate mindfulness as a core pedagogical competency within the **TTC curriculum**.
2. **Strategic Inclusion:** Incorporate the ‘Two Pathways’ model into the **National School Health Policy** to address the proximate biological causes of learning loss.
3. **Human Capital Focus:** Frame ‘cognitive readiness’ as a prerequisite for the success of all other educational and nutritional investments.



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